

## Reinventing American Judaism



*The financial crisis and demographic shifts are reshaping the Jewish community in ways we could hardly have imagined a generation ago. Historian and Brandeis University professor Jonathan Sarna, author of *A Time for Every Purpose: Letters to a Young Jew*, sheds light on what history can teach us about Jewish revival in uncertain times.*

### **What happened the last time the Jewish community faced a financial crisis of this magnitude?**

After the last frightening economic downturn, following the 1929 stock-market crash, American Jewry turned inward, paying little heed to what was going on abroad, particularly in Germany. As the American Jewish Year Book gently put it in 1931: "The Jews of the United States did not during the past year watch the situation of their overseas co-religionists with the same concentration as in the preceding twelve months." We were, as a result, less prepared than we should have been to help the Jews of Europe after Hitler rose to power in 1933.

In addition, Jewish education was widely abandoned in the late 1920s and 1930s. The number of students enrolled in New York City's Jewish schools dropped by 22% between 1928 and 1935, and in Chicago enrollment plunged 16% in the six months from December 1930 to June 1931. We paid a big price for these declines: Those young Jews never made up for what they lost. We need to be careful nowadays to avoid sacrificing Jewish education to economic expediency.

### **Were there any positive repercussions of the Great Depression?**

Yes, Jews turned primarily to one another during the 1930s, relying on ties of faith and kinship to carry them through the hard times. Traditions of self-help and mutual aid overcame religious, ideological, and generational differences. These values have been forgotten in some circles during the more recent years of plenty, but they bear remembering: All Jews are family, and thus responsible for helping one another.

Also, the government took more responsibility for social services. Jews were initially

reticent about accepting this welfare, but it ultimately transformed postwar Jewish life. Money freed up from social services was devoted to Israel and Jewish education. The New Deal also modeled for Jews the benefits of centralization at both the national and local levels.

### **How are today's economic woes reshaping American Jewish life?**

A new era of belt-tightening is threatening a number of bold initiatives fueled by the great rise of Jewish wealth in the '80s and the '90s. Compounding the problem is the fact that while different sectors of the American Jewish community are busy explaining to all who will listen why their particular area of Jewish service has to be preserved at all costs, no one has put forth serious ideas about how to cut the Jewish communal budget by one-third when Jewish foundations, even excluding the Bernard Madoff losses, are approximately one-third poorer than they were this time last year. Over the next few years we will see which organizations in Jewish life have kept strong balance sheets, budgeted prudently, and built broad-scale support, and which have not. At a time when individual needs are rising and communal means are falling, the Jewish community will have to engage in a kind of organizational triage. My guess is that many Jewish educational institutions, several Jewish museums, and some other Jewish organizations will not survive.

### **How will the major Jewish religious movements ride out this downturn?**

Orthodox organizations appear to be in the worst shape. Orthodox Jews have been disproportionately involved in banking and the stock market, and were also disproportionately hurt by Madoff; \$2 billion, by one account, were lost by members of a single Orthodox synagogue. My guess, sadly, is that some educational and charitable Orthodox institutions will go bankrupt. Reform temples across the country have been badly hurt, affecting the Union for Reform Judaism and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as well; both organizations are likely to look different in the years ahead. In the Conservative Movement, financial woes have led to quite a few recent synagogue mergers, especially between synagogues located close by whose members walked to shul in the '50s but who drive there now; the transformation of several Solomon Schechter days schools into community day schools; and significant cutbacks at the Jewish Theological Seminary. In short, no religious sector of the Jewish community is immune from this downturn. In the years ahead, it will be a struggle just to climb back to where our religious movements were in 2007.

### **What are some of the trends to watch as Jewish institutions adjust to the new economic reality?**

First, I think we will see an increase in the number of mergers among institutions—Jewish with Jewish, as well as Jewish with secular (see [“Priceless Partnerships”](#)). Several Jewish organizations have already merged or are close to merging with non-Jewish organizations, such as the JCC with the YMCA of Greater Toledo, the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center with Temple University, and Baltimore Hebrew College with Towson University. Some Jewish day schools are also talking of sharing facilities and running joint secular classes with non-Jewish private or parochial schools. None of this could have happened in the 1930s, when anti-Semitism was so rampant. This trend also signals a certain degree of confidence, or overconfidence: that we can

partner with non-Jewish organizations without losing an essential part of ourselves.

A second trend I think we'll see is an effort to reengage small donors. Historically, American Jewish philanthropy was in the hands of a small number of wealthy, elite Jews. That changed in World War I when Jewish immigrants began a massive campaign to help relatives left behind in Europe. For the next seventy years or so, Jewish philanthropy became widespread, not only as a way to raise money but also as a form of Jewish identification: Giving money to the Jewish federation on "Super Sunday" served for some as a once-a-year way of declaring "I am a member of the Jewish community." Then, about twenty years ago, business-minded consultants persuaded Jewish federation leaders to focus on "big givers," arguing that the cost per dollar raised (financially and time-wise) was much less than for their less-wealthy counterparts. Jewish philanthropy refocused on the wealthy elite, and consequently the United Jewish Communities donor base dropped from 900,000 to under half a million. Fortunately, as the Obama campaign has proven, new web technology has made it much easier to engage small donors inexpensively and efficiently. Jewish philanthropy, I suspect, will likewise become more broadly based in the years ahead.

Third, as a result of Madoff losses, belt-tightening, and nationwide dissatisfaction with executive perks, we're likely to see higher ethical standards, reduced executive compensation, and greater transparency in Jewish organizational life. Executive salaries are likely to fall at foundations, federations, seminaries, day schools, and other key institutions. In the short run these cuts will have little effect on the Jewish community; people are glad just to be employed. In the long run, however, we may be deprived of quality individuals who choose instead to work in the private sector.

Fourth, I believe power will flow back to the center. The American Jewish community tends to follow national trends, and with a U.S. president at the helm who believes in government as a force for good and for change, I expect we'll see efforts to "rein in the cowboys" who have pursued go-it-alone policies for solving communal problems, and the promotion of greater communal cooperation and centralized planning.

Fifth, I anticipate a new focus on "sweat equity." In the absence of start-up money, young, creative, technologically savvy Jews will volunteer their time to causes that inspire them. Indeed, as unemployment rises, Jewish leaders are already trying to harness the time of the unemployed for the benefit of the Jewish community, and many of those unemployed are eager to be useful.

Sixth, just as we saw in the aftermath of the 1929 crash, we can expect a discernible focus in the U.S. Jewish community and less engagement with Israel, especially among the non-Orthodox. Even the war in Gaza did not lead to mass fundraising for Israel—a first since its inception in 1948—and new evidence indicates that fewer young Jews are traveling to Israel for summer or semester-abroad programs. Long term, this may lead to a rise in the number of American Jews who know Israel only from what they see on television.

Seventh, perhaps surprisingly, I also anticipate a simultaneous uptick in *aliyah*, especially among the Orthodox and those who have already spent time in Israel, but have been reluctant to take the economic risk of starting a new life there. As financial prospects darken in the U.S., Israel begins to look more promising to some. Interestingly, *Nefesh*

*b'Nefesh*, an organization which supports Jews who make *aliyah*, has just received new foundation funding, thereby offering generous grants to those who settle in Israel's north.

### **What other factors are having an impact on Jewish life?**

We've been experiencing a demographic decline for more than a half century, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total U.S. population. If the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey estimates are correct, the American Jewish population numbers about 5.2 million, meaning that Jews are about 1.8% of the national population, down from almost 3.7% in the 1940s. The small decline in absolute numbers that some Jewish demographers believe has taken place in the past decade—from about 5.5 million to 5.2 million—would mark the first drop in the American Jewish population since the colonial era.

### **What accounts for this decline?**

The reasons are many: a low Jewish birthrate, below replacement level of 2.1 children per couple; fewer Jewish immigrants, especially since Soviet Jewish immigration ended and post 9/11 immigration restrictions took hold; a flattening of conversions to Judaism; and, of course, the burgeoning effects of non-marriage, late marriage, and intermarriage. An astonishing 2,345,000 Americans report having Jewish grandparents but not being Jewish themselves. Had their descendants—people such as Senator John Kerry and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright—remained Jewish, the demographics of our community would look altogether different. Instead, should present trends continue, the American Jewish population will likely drop below five million within the next thirty years.

### **Is Israel faring any better demographically?**

Any year now, Israel will overtake the United States as the largest Jewish community in the world. Many say it has already happened. Today, more Jews live in greater Tel Aviv than in greater New York.

From an Israeli point of view, this shift marks the ultimate triumph of Zionism: the first time since biblical days that Israel can lay claim to being the single largest population center of world Jewry, numbering some 5.6 million. For American Jews, though, dropping to second place may prove sobering and require adjustments to our communal thinking.

### **What kind of adjustments to communal thinking?**

A major adjustment concerns how we view the diaspora. Today, there is an enormous disconnect between the image of the diaspora in the contemporary Jewish mind and the reality of the diaspora as it now exists and likely will continue in the new millennium. Jews think they are part of an *am olam*, a global people spread from one end of the world unto the other. In actuality, though, some 80% of world Jewry lives in just two countries—the United States and Israel; half of all Jews live in five metropolitan areas—Tel Aviv, New York, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, and Haifa; and over 98% of all Jews live in fifteen countries—Israel, the United States, France, Canada, the United Kingdom, Russia, Argentina, Germany, Australia, Brazil, Ukraine, South Africa, Hungary, Mexico, and Belgium. Most of the 200 or so countries of the world, including Iraq, Syria, and Egypt,

where Jews lived for millennia, are barren of Jews or have communities so small—1,000 or fewer Jews—as to be unsustainable. For all that we Jews like to talk about “repairing the world,” and do indeed contribute energy and funds to this purpose, the truth is that we have largely withdrawn from Africa, Asia, and Latin America—the areas of the world that most need repairing.

There is, to be sure, a silver lining in this data: The vast majority of diaspora Jews are now living in economically advanced, politically stable, and socially attractive environments. Yet this benefit comes at a global price.

### **What is the price of living well in the diaspora?**

Whereas Christian, Islamic, and Eastern religious practitioners are spreading their diasporas around the globe, we Jews who invented the very concept of a diaspora are reducing our global exposure, thereby becoming ever more concentrated. The question, long term, is whether geographic consolidation will prove to have been a prescient move, or a blunder of historic proportions.

### **Internally, what kinds of changes are you observing in American Jewish religious life?**

I see a burgeoning pluralism, greater focus upon the individual than upon the group, the emergence of grassroots movements in Jewish religious life (including a group of new, non-denominational *minyanim*), and more permeable denominational and even interfaith boundaries—all trends that parallel what is happening in American religion generally. About 20% of Jews, at least in Boston, refuse to identify with one of the more familiar rubrics—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist. Indeed, the fastest growing Movement in Jewish life is “Other”—people who do not identify with any Movement.

There are also a growing number of one-generation Jews—converts to Judaism who have neither Jewish parents nor Jewish children—as well as a record number of intermarriages. Mixed marriages (when calculated on the basis of the couple rate, rather than the 47% individual rate) now outnumber in-group Jewish marriages by almost two to one, according to the 1990 and 2001 Jewish population surveys. In addition, there’s a waning of Jewish opposition to intermarriage. In its 2000 “Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion,” the American Jewish Committee found that, approximately half of Jewish respondents agreed that “it is racist to oppose Jewish-gentile marriages” and more than half disagreed with the statement: “It would pain me if my child married a gentile.”

### **Given this trend, will Jewish “peoplehood” become a less significant way of identifying oneself as a Jew?**

I suspect so. Just over a decade ago, in 1998, a survey by sociologist Steven M. Cohen found that only half of American Jews agreed with the statement “I look at the entire Jewish community as my extended family,” and only 47% agreed that “I have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world.” Many contemporary Jews, intermarried Jews in particular, find notions of Jewish peoplehood to be uncomfortably alien, at odds with personal autonomy and America’s universalistic and individualistic

ethos.

### **Will the 21st century be marked more by Jewish assimilation or revitalization?**

It is easy to make the case both ways. One week we hear that intermarriage is going through the roof, and the next week that Jewish day schools are bursting at the seams. One week we learn that the Jewish birthrate is collapsing, and the next week that Jewish culture—art, music, dance, theater, film—is flourishing. Whether assimilation or revitalization ultimately predominates will be determined day by day, community by community, Jew by Jew.

### **What can tilt the swing towards Jewish engagement?**

Jewish organizations must be able to identify a mission or cause compelling enough for American Jews to become passionate about and rally around. The great causes that once invigorated American Jewry—immigrant absorption, creating and sustaining a Jewish state, rescuing endangered Jews from around the world—are essentially behind us.

There are, to be sure, no shortage of significant and worthy secular and universal causes for American Jews to embrace, among them environmentalism, ethical treatment of animals, and world hunger, but these are not *Jewish* causes in the way that Zionism and the Soviet Jewry movement were. While social justice has made a huge comeback in our community, I doubt it will suffice as a mission to keep Jews Jewish. Diaspora Jews today are the poorer for not having a well-defined, elevating mission to inspire us.

### **Do you see any cause for optimism?**

Yes. We Jews are a very adaptable people. Time and again we have survived by carefully analyzing the problems we face and changing our ways to resolve them. Repeatedly, Jews—usually young Jews—who've been dissatisfied with the American Jewish "establishment" and fearful that Judaism will wither without change have initiated revitalization movements. Though radical and inevitably controversial, such awakenings as the *havurah* movement and the Jewish women's movement ultimately made Judaism more appealing, more meaningful, and more sensitive to the concerns of the day. Paradoxically, the fear that Judaism would not survive helped to ensure that it did.

### **What are some of the lessons you've learned as a historian from such previous efforts to reinvent American Judaism?**

First, continuity may depend upon discontinuity—turning past wisdom on its head to revitalize the Jewish future, as both the Zionist movement and the women's movement have done. However much we must support a "continuity agenda," it bears remembering that such discontinuities, in response to new historical conditions, may have a greater impact still.

Precisely because they are not wedded to the community's central assumptions, those on the periphery of Jewish life are the most likely to come up with such innovative approaches. Many of the central developments in American Jewish life have emanated from such "outsiders" as the young men who first created the American Reform

movement in Charleston back in the 1820s and the young radical Jews of the 1960s and '70s who created the *havurah* movement. When outsiders call for change, we dare not close our ears.

Second, we cannot place our trust in magic formulas or silver bullets. No single panacea has ever lived up to its advanced billing. Multiple efforts, however, can succeed wondrously. The lesson, then, is to resist placing all of our eggs in one continuity basket.

Finally, the American Jewish community has benefited from challenges. As our 355 years on American soil testify, we have repeatedly confounded those who predicted gloom and doom, and, after periods of adversity, have often emerged stronger than ever before.

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